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SUBJECT: CIVIL SOCIETY REGROUPS POST ELECTIONS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador and Poloffs met separately with human rights activists, civil society leaders and political analysts following the March 19 presidential elections to learn about their post-election plans. Most of the civil society leaders agreed that Milinkevich proved to be a good leader of the opposition, even if he was too disorganized and Europe-focused. Many leaders lamented the opposition's missed opportunities, but conceded that Lukashenko made some mistakes that had helped the opposition. Several human rights leaders described their plans to continue efforts to promote democratic change in Belarus. The Belarusian Assembly of Democratic NGOs plans to launch a new social movement, "For Freedom," aimed at uniting civil society and political parties. The Belarusian Association of Journalists continues to support the few remaining registered independent newspapers in Belarus. The leaders called for a stricter, longer visa ban list to include local level GOB officials. Some human rights activists claimed that the GOB has created a "black list" of activists' names which makes it more difficult, but not impossible, for activists to travel abroad. End summary.

¶2. (C) In a series of meetings, Ambassador and Poloffs recently called on several human rights and civil society activists to get their assessments of the new political landscape following the presidential elections and to learn more about their plans for maintaining the momentum for democratic change. On April 5, Ambassador hosted political analysts Vyacheslav Orgish, Vladimir Rovda, Sergei Balyking and Konstatin Skuratovich. Emboffs also recently met with Belarusian Assembly of Democratic NGOs (BADN) representative Alyona Volynets, Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) deputy head Andrey Bastunets, human rights NGO Vyasna lawyers Valentin Stephanovich and Ales Belatsky, Belarusian Helsinki Committee Head Tatiana Protko, Association of Democratic Local Councilors' head Ales Mikhalevich, and independent media Belapan journalist Maryna Rakhlei.

Milinkevich Did a Good Job...

¶3. (C) Human rights NGO Vyasna lawyers Valentin Stephanovich and Ales Belatsky opined that the opposition did a decent job with the election campaign and the post election protests, despite the repressive conditions under which they were forced to work. Stephanovich and Belyatsky commented that

Milinkevich is seen as a professional and is widely accepted in Europe and even in Belarus. The lawyers believed that the opposition did not make any grave public mistakes and reassured Poloffs that the internal squabbling amongst the senior leadership of Milinkevich's campaign team was not visible to the supporters.

...But Is Disorganized and Too Focused on Europe

¶4. (C) Many activists, however, expressed concern over how unorganized the opposition was leading up to and following the elections. Belapan independent media journalist Maryna Rakhlei and Belarusian Helsinki Committee head Tatiana Protko commented separately that it was quite clear that Milinkevich had no post-Election Day plans for how to lead the protesters. Protko noted that Milinkevich did not arrive at the Election Night demonstration until two hours after it began. Rakhlei mentioned that Milinkevich's campaign team missed their deadline to submit their campaign platform for publication in state newspapers, and almost missed the deadline to file a complaint about the election. Rakhlei commented that Milinkevich's press secretary is uninformed about Milinkevich's activities and whereabouts and is not able to relay information about Milinkevich to the inquiring press. Despite his flaws, however, Rakhlei believes that Milinkevich is the best that the opposition has, even if Milinkevich is more a "trusted face" than an organizer.

¶5. (C) Activists also expressed concern that Milinkevich spends too much time building support abroad instead of in Belarus. Rakhlei noted that even when he came to October Square, he spent most of his time doing interviews for foreign journalists instead of engaging with protesters. The Vyasna lawyers admitted that even though his international support helps to prevent the GOB from arresting and prosecuting him, it would be better if he were not abroad so often.

Missed Opportunities for the Opposition

¶6. (C) During a discussion with Ambassador, political analysts Vyacheslav Orgish, Vladimir Rovda, Sergei Balyking and Konstatin Skuratovich lamented the opposition's lost opportunities. They said that the regime experienced conflicts with entrepreneurs and has had problems providing salaries, pensions, and communal services to Belarusians. The opposition, however, failed to take advantage of the GOB's shortcomings. The analysts speculated that the overwhelming majority of the bureaucrats--90 percent--are unhappy with the Lukashenko regime, but the opposition remains too weak to capitalize on their discontent. In separate discussions, Association of Democratic Local Councilors' head Ales Mikhalevich claimed that only the high-level GOB officials maintain genuine allegiance to Lukashenko, while the rank and file officials carry out their work in a perfunctory manner. Mikhalevich told Poloffs that mid-level bureaucrats, police and customs officers favored Milinkevich over Lukashenko.

Lukashenko's Mistakes Help Opposition

¶7. (C) Mikhalevich commented that Lukashenko made several mistakes, which actually helped the opposition. For example, when Lukashenko complained that protesters beat soldiers during the demonstrations, he indirectly communicated to the masses that the seemingly impregnable security forces could be overpowered. Mikhalevich also said it was a mistake for Lukashenko to make enemies out of European countries, especially the Czech Republic, because Belarusians see many similarities between themselves and the Czech people and therefore closely identify themselves with their Czech counterparts.

Mood of the Country Post Elections

¶8. (C) Mikhalevich told Poloffs that the mood of the country has changed; he believes there is massive public support for reform. He likened the current mood of the country to the mood in Belarus at the end of the 80's and the beginning of the 90's, when Belarus first broke from the Soviet Union.

¶9. (C) The Vyasna lawyers said that unlike in 2001 after the presidential elections, there is no feeling of loss or a defeat among the population. They commented that the fear and confusion that accompanied the arrests following the elections are no longer present. Instead, they said that these activists who are being released from prison are very optimistic about the future. Their time in jail gave them the opportunity to meet new people, establish new contacts, and create new ideas. The Vyasna lawyers opined that the opposition has been infused with "fresh new blood," and that these activists are filled with hope. However, the lawyers warned that this moment could pass if concrete plans are not quickly implemented.

¶10. (C) Protko lauded the youth's significant role in the protests following the elections. She claimed that they are a new generation, unafraid to challenge the regime. She added, however, that they are still very unorganized.

"For Freedom" Campaign

¶11. (C) Belarusian Assembly of Democratic NGOs (BADN) representative Alyona Volyenets told Poloff that BADN was trying to create a new social movement, which would unite political forces and civil society. (Note: Volyenets said that BADN had previously kept the "For Freedom" campaign separate from the Ten Plus Coalition party because BADN wanted the movement to "outlive" Aleksandr Milinkevich's presidential candidacy.) Volyenets said the movement, which will focus on strengthening grassroots organizations and activists, would rely primarily on the Internet for information dissemination. She referred Poloff to the "For Freedom" website www.za-svabodu.org, where BADN places information, resources and postings for their member NGOs and activists. Volyenets stressed that the new movement's structure should not be vertical, so as to ensure its survival if the head of the movement is removed. Volyenets also warned that the movement should be unencumbered by bureaucracy, thereby allowing it to easily and effectively make decisions. BADN had already presented this proposal to the Ten Plus Coalition leadership. Although the proposal is still under discussion, Volyenets told Poloff that the coalition has more or less agreed to work with BADN.

Media's Struggles Continue

¶12. (C) Civil society leaders and human rights activists agreed that independent media in Belarus continued to shrink. Vyasna lawyers Stephanovich and Belatsky asserted that if even one opposition TV channel could be established, "that would make all the difference." They noted, however, that the Internet has been a useful medium to disseminate information, especially among the youth.

¶13. (C) Belarusian Association of Journalists' (BAJ) deputy head Andrey Bastunets told Poloff that BAJ's first priority is to support those newspapers that are still registered in Belarus. According to Bastunets, there are no more than 30 registered independent newspapers in Belarus. Of the 30 newspapers, state authorities refuse to sell 19 newspapers at kiosks and will not include 17 newspapers on its state distribution list. Bastunets relayed to Poloff that BAJ's second priority was to help those newspapers that have been forced to "leave the print market" launch online versions of their newspapers. In addition, BAJ will work with human rights groups (Vyasna and Pravovaya Initsiativa) and writers' groups (Pen Center and The Union of Writers) to continue to

monitor violations against journalists and mass media. BAJ would like to continue to conduct seminars to train journalists, but Bastunets lamented that it is almost impossible given the limitations on foreign technical assistance and GOB's unwillingness to let BAJ rent space for seminars.

Demand for a Longer, Stricter Visa Ban List

¶14. (C) Vyasna has compiled a list of local Belarusian judges and officials who propagate the regime's repressions, university rectors guilty of expelling student protesters, and Belarusian Television (BT) journalists to include on the visa ban list. Expanding the list to include not only the top leadership sends the message that all will be held accountable for their part in the regime's oppression. The Vyasna lawyers also urged the EU to be stricter in their visa bans since many GOB officials continue to travel to Turkey, the Czech Republic and Cyprus.

GOB's Opposition Blacklist

¶15. (C) Bastunets told Poloff that the GOB created a black list with opposition activists' names for customs and border control officials. Bastunets claimed that if a person is on this list, they are subject to intense search and scrutiny when crossing the border. However, Bastunets said that he was not aware of any border guards preventing activists from crossing so long as they were not involved in illegal activities. Separately, Mikhalevich noted that activists mainly face harassment and extensive searches that last for hours at the borders, but that they are eventually allowed to cross. Mikhalevich added that during the searches many customs officials said that they support Milinkevich, not Lukashenko. (Note: We have heard similar statements from Milinkevich directly and other opposition leaders.)

Comment

¶16. (C) Civil society and human rights groups appear to be stronger and more committed to fighting for change now than they were following the 2001 presidential elections. Despite their criticisms of Ten Plus leader Milinkevich, these groups remain interested in cooperation with political parties to promote their common goals. It remains unclear, however, whether the political parties, and the Ten Plus Coalition in particular, will seize the opportunity to work with civil society and to incorporate their support into the Ten Plus Coalition camp. Moreover, the established opposition groups have had difficulty reaching out to the hundreds of youth who participated in the post election protests but who hold no affiliation with any group or party. Until these new personalities are acknowledged and folded into the decision-making process, the Ten Plus Coalition runs the risk of losing the momentum it gained in the presidential elections.

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